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How Can the Union Serve Married Students Best?

By LAWRENCE SUHM
Program Director, Wisconsin Union

What can the union do for the married students?

This question continues to be an important topic of discussion as the proportion of married students on our campuses increases each year—reaching in 1959 about 25% on most campuses.

For several years the Wisconsin Union has experimented with various approaches to programming for married students. As a beginning, special services to married students were offered in terms of free union membership privileges to husbands and wives of fee-paying students, giving reduced rates on couple bowling, sponsoring special holiday parties for children of campus married couples, and placing high chairs in the dining units. There was some feeling, however, that the regular Union all-campus programs were not adequately reaching these somewhat older and more mature married students and that the Union could do more to cater to their special needs and interests.

What They Say They Want

In 1957 a Wisconsin graduate student conducted a survey of 216 of the campus' married couples as part of his thesis entitled "Social Recreation of Married Students." He found that Wisconsin married students indicated their social recreational preferences in the following order: dances for married students, bowling for couples on special nights, lecture series on interior decorating and home planning, craft and hobby programs, drop-in coffee hours, and card parties. The survey indicated that married students would like to have the programs on a monthly basis in the evening and that a majority would be willing to work on the programs.

The preferences of the married students as indicated in the study were followed closely in organizing programs for this group. A committee of married students, with the help of a part-time staff advisor from the union, planned, promoted, and carried out a wide variety of the programs mentioned above for the better part of a year. A nursery in the union staffed by volunteers from a sorority was offered at one of the larger reception programs to facilitate attendance.

The results during the first year were far from encouraging as evidenced by low attendance, lack of continuity of committee members, inability to get married couples to work on the programs, and subsequent discouragement of those who did continue with the organization.

What One Union Tried

A change in the union staff the next fall brought a new married student advisor, renewed enthusiasm and some new program ideas for another attempt to find the right formula to attract this group which now comprised nearly 25% of the total student enrollment.

Through an extensive publicity campaign, a mailing list of 550 interested married couples was compiled. A newsletter called "The Ball and Chain" was sent out monthly and included news about available baby sitters, a furniture exchange, current information on housing, a gossip column about members of the group, part-time job opportunities, and information about coming programs thought to be of special interest to married students and their families. It was also used as a simple means of advertising our monthly program.

An intensive publicity campaign boosted by excellent cooperation from the city and campus newspapers attracted 40 couples to the first program, which consisted of dancing, bridge, table games, free refreshments, and a movie party.

At each of the ensuing monthly parties we devoted a half hour at the end of the evening to a discussion of what the group would like to have the next month. Then one of the couples would volunteer to take charge of all the arrangements for the program while another volunteered to write the newsletter. It was the unanimous opinion of those who attended the monthly programs that there should be as little formal organization as possible, no officers, no dues, no constitution, and no committees. While the group was called the "Married Couples Club," it proudly advertised itself as "the most disorganized organization on the campus."

The schedule of monthly programs for the year included a square dance, toboggan and ice skating party, a family bowling party, a travelogue presentation, a cookout, an evening of outdoor dancing and swimming, and a weekend camping trip.

Result: Few Takers

In spite of the fact that the programs were planned according to the expressed wishes of the participants, run by members of the group with the aid of a staff adviser, financed out of funds provided by the union, and advertised directly to the couples that had indicated particular interest in them, the monthly attendance figures decreased as the difficulty of getting couples to take an active part in the operation of the programs grew. And married couples were heard to say: "We'd rather entertain a few people in our own apartments; we're busy; we'd just as soon be left alone." The Married Couples Club was dropped.

The union backtracked again to try to find out more about how the needs of the married students might differ from those of single students—and might explain the seeming disinterest in the first programming attempts.

Differences to Watch Out For

The findings:

At Wisconsin, the average age of the married students is nearly 28, while that of the single students is 21.5. More than half of the married students are in graduate school. A large majority of them live in private homes or apartments, many at a considerable distance from the campus and separated from the normal stream of campus activities, and making it tough for married couples to hear about programs or to get to them if they do hear.

Most of the social programs provided by the union for the younger single students do not meet the need of the married students, who have places of their own to entertain friends and play bridge, facilities to cook their own meals, television and hi-fi sets, a place to study, magazines and newspapers of their choice.

Those things which are not available in their own living quarters are often provided by neighborhood and church groups, professional organizations, or by the wives' organizations—opportunities to meet other married couples, inexpensive and convenient baby-sitters or nursery service, bridge clubs, furniture exchanges, picnics and outings

Those programs and services which might only be provided by the union and which married students indicated they would be interested in participating in are often not the answer, in reality, because they haven't got the extra money after paying household expenses for two or more (which single students don't have to worry about); because they haven't got the time after housekeeping, shopping, working at job, preparing meals, and caring for children (on top of studying); or because they simply "don't find anybody to stay with the baby."

Some Further Factors

Commenting on the lack of participation of married students in campus activities, a recent New York Times Magazine article reports, "This withdrawal seems to be less true of married male students. Here, often, the student activity may be related to future plans or aspirations, as in the case of the athlete who plans to commercialize on his ability after graduation, or the star debater who is planning to go to law school. However, administrators report that even among the men, promising campus leaders tend to become less active after marriage; if they become fathers, too, then they are little more than commuters to classes."

One of the most active Wisconsin Married Couples Club members, who is now an electronics engineer, recently wrote, "It's a cinch that no leadership will come from within a group like the Married Couples Club because married couples know for sure that school is their number one object in being on the campus. I didn't re-enter union committees or Wisconsin Players (after getting married), but I did participate in engineering groups because I could measure to some extent their benefit to me."

Possible Clues for the Union

What, then, can or should the union do?

While the club type of organization does not seem to be the answer, judging from Wisconsin's experience, the union

ED 000238

can provide, at least, certain simple facilities and services which will make it easy for married students to use the union—high chairs for children in the dining rooms, nursery service in the union for special programs, holiday parties at times when the children can be brought along, and a courtesy card for the non-student wife (or husband) so she (or he) can use the union freely and independently when the student partner is in classes or working. (Several hundred students apply for the Wisconsin "husband-wife privilege cards" each year). And programs slanted especially toward home-making interests have an appeal for some—gallery displays of contemporary home furnishings and of well designed toys, craft shop demonstrations on home decorating, discussions on budgeting and insurance.

To let them know about such special programs is another matter (most married students not seeing the campus paper). One of the most direct and successful ways is to tell the chairmen of the neighborhood wives' organizations, where such exist, who in turn pass it on to members at the meetings, or in the joint laundry room.

Posters advertising union events that might be of interest to married students should, of course, be placed on bulletin boards in married student housing areas (and, again not to be overlooked, in the laundromats).

Don't Overlook the On-going Events

Finally, the union that is blessed with a strong **cultural** (vis-a-vis social) program—concerts, plays, forums, motion pictures, art exhibitions—the kind of events likely to have a natural appeal to older, more mature students — probably already has more married students participating (on an individual participation basis) than it realizes. And this, by way of sufficient emphasis on such programming, may be the best service of all that a union can render married students, who do appreciate greatly occasional release from household chores.

Throughout we need to remember, too, that one of the greatest needs of married couples is to be able to spend such leisure time as they have with each other and their children. They need to have, to be sure, a break from routine, but without becoming involved in more joining, planning sessions, pressures to attend, buying of tickets, and other continuing obligations to still another special group.

New Report Tells Adult Center Needs

Trends in the development of adult education centers throughout the country —both collegiate and non-collegiate—are summarized in a recent report of the national Conference on Architecture for Adult Education held at Purdue last December.

Copies of the 116 page printed booklet, entitled "Creating a Climate for Adult Learning," may be obtained at $1 by writing to Dr. Glenn Jensen, executive director, Adult Education Association, 743 North Wabash, Chicago 11, Ill.

Union As Conference Center

Besides chapters on "Basic Concepts," and "Some Guides to Planning," the report makes mention of the prevalent use of college unions as adult conference centers in the following terms:

"The director of Wisconsin's Union pointed out that although there are 20 campus buildings across the nation planned expressly for adult education and a dozen more being planned, there are more than 450 college union buildings, many of which handle adult conferences.

"At many institutions the union building is the only facility that the college has, or ever will have, for adult education. The union typically includes a variety of meeting rooms, lounges, registration facilities, dining rooms, game rooms, cultural facilities, and often a small auditorium and guest rooms.

Purdue's Approach Included

"He also indicated that at least 125 such buildings have been built or planned in recent years under the stimulus of the federal college housing program which provided $100 million in loan funds at low interest rates. The union phase of the federal program is likely to continue at the rate of $25 million a year in loan funds."

The report also describes the planning procedures for Purdue's new $8½ million dollar conference center and the reasons it was designed as an addition to the Purdue Union.

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on a new site, combining it with a central dining hall which is to feed all dormitory students on a contract basis.

Central Missouri State College, Warrensburg, is currently conducting a comprehensive needs survey among students